

The secrets revealed by a 370 year old window.

When, on the 3rd February 2016 I opened the front door of The Manor House to an unexpected visitor; Martin Roberts of Pvsner Guides (new edition coming out March 30th 2021 who was preparing notes for a future edition of the County Durham guide (<https://www.amazon.com/County-Durham-Pevsner-Architectural-Guides/dp/0300225040>) , I was pleased to show Martin around and as I was still taking stock of the building we had bought I learned a lot from him including an explanation of the features that make the building listed as a Grade II* (the star is important!) historically important building. In doing so we inevitably toured the cellars and Martin remarked on a sorry looking, half boarded-up window and after inspecting the method by which the frame was constructed he informed me that the window was from about 1650 predating The Manor House itself and most likely had been re-used from a building that had been demolished. I couldn't have known that a couple of years later these fortuitous comments would provide me with important leads in revealing the forgotten history of the whole of The Manor House, how it came about and the purpose for which it was built.

The window is between the (lets call it) central corridor of the cellars and a space that is at the bottom of a short set of steps from the rear basement door from the car park. It was a space that was puzzling me as it has what appears to be a bricked-up arch and an abutment just inside the door that is made of twentieth century red brick but I simply took it as an interesting comment that the window was from an older building. I looked at Newcastle House in Lincolns Inn Fields in London, a building which I believe may have influenced the design of The Manor House and that appears to have an area under arches where I assume carts and carriages would have approached to service the house. I thought maybe the area behind the rear door was originally a court where carts came through an arch to deliver to the kitchens. It is important to know that the ground at the rear of The Manor House was likely originally around 6ft lower than it is now.

In researching for chapter three of Hidden in Full View 'A Rural Mansion: Architecture and Design', including reading-up on the key features of a Queen Anne mansion house and symmetry of the design, I spent some time simply looking at The Manor House from different points of view externally and internally, and a picture of how things used to be began to emerge. It is important to look at a building like The Manor House in the context of the evolution of over three centuries, so the virtual circle of looking at the history while understanding the key features gradually pulled back the blinds to offer further revelations. A study of the rear view from the car park while reminding myself that the door to the cellars was a twentieth century addition revealed to me that where the door now is there must previously have been a window – the symmetry of the other windows confirms this and it would have been fully visible given the original ground level. Therefore, if this was a window then the cellar entrance area must have originally been a room. Following this reasoning it became apparent that the bricked-up arch was probably originally a fire place and the abutment was most likely there to support the current ceiling/floor above and probably conceals part of the old chimney breast (I plan sometime to remove a brick to have a look). Contemporary anecdotal evidence told me of the original servant's staircase that came from the first floor down to the ground floor and cellars and studying how this would have been revealed to me where the original door to the cellars from the original court and gardens at the rear must have been. Also that the servants stairs into the cellars opened on to the kitchens in the cellars and a door to the room above on the ground floor. I therefore deduced that the large room above which fronts on to village green – and originally to St. Edmunds - would likely have been the dining room of the mansion house. Therefore, the mystery cellar room with the window would most likely have been the cook's

room – straight opposite the kitchens. The cook would have been a senior member of the household staff and I believe would have had a private room.

The origin of the window became interesting when considering the Sedgefield Enclosure Act of 1636. The act, like most others throughout England resulted, among other things in the lord of the manor – in this case the Bishopric of Durham – allocating ‘waste land’ to existing land owners. A recipient was Nicolas Freville who benefitted with Westfields, a four-acre allocation on which The Manor House was subsequently built and which included messuages (dwelling houses). The land around pre-enclosure Sedgefield must have included other messuages which would have been demolished as a result of the 1636 act. Perhaps the window in the cellars came from one of those. The enclosure acts resulted in many peasants being moved from lands they had traditionally worked and the landowners who benefitted in Sedgefield went on to build around St. Edmunds church and thereby formed the village centre we still know and love today.

This 370-year old window may not have shed natural light for nearly four centuries but it has illuminated many secrets that otherwise may have remained in the shadows. I’m pleased to say that after reading Hidden in Full View Martin Roberts was kind enough to leave a review on this page which reads “Many congratulations on such an authoritative volume.” Martin Roberts, Pvsner Guides”